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Statement submitted by *Regards de femmes*, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Regards de femmes works in France and around the world, in partnership with a very large number of women's rights associations, to ensure that all domains, both public and private, offer women and girls security, equality, recognition and respect for their dignity. Those areas of autonomy and freedom allow women to study, receive medical care, be tried in court, work and flourish, together with men and other women.

In order to work towards the equality of rights, responsibilities and dignity between men and women, including women with disabilities, *Regards de femmes* refers to:

- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Article 5 urges States parties to take all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural attitudes of men and women, with a view to eliminating prejudices and customary practices that are based on gender-based inequality and stereotypes
- The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, which includes all forms of threat, harm or physical, sexual and psychological violence
- The Beijing Platform for Action: Violence against women is "the most pervasive yet least recognized human rights abuse in the world" and article 124 of the Platform for Action states that Governments should "condemn violence against women and refrain from invoking any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination as set out in the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women"
- The Millennium Development Goals.

In order for girls to achieve autonomy and emancipation, a non-patriarchal education for both girls and boys is essential. That will give girls access to professional activities and combat gender-based violence.

The economic and financial crisis should not lead to the deterioration of women's rights; on the contrary it should provide a window of opportunity. The crisis can only be overcome through the emancipation of women in all areas, including economic fields, in order to achieve equality between women and men at all levels of decision-making.

Certain traditional or religious practices, models and constraints preclude the full recognition of women's capabilities and effective rights.

The elimination of humiliation, discrimination and violence suffered or "chosen" by women or committed against women, including in the name of religion or custom, must be ensured by all Governments and States that have signed the above-mentioned Conventions, Declaration and Platform for Action.

In France, as in all countries around the world, women's rights and dignity are increasingly being attacked in the name of tradition, custom or religious practices. It should be reiterated that freedom of conscience, a fundamental human right, is inextricably linked to the neutrality of States with regard to philosophical choices

and personal beliefs. Both should remain in the private domain, since displaying or imposing them can insult the beliefs of others.

In order that we can live together in mutual respect and rise above differences, *Regards de femmes* promotes secularism – a powerful tool of universal emancipation that provides women with strength and protection.

The measures taken include:

Enshrining in the post-2015 development agenda the obligation to register births

Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child shall have the right to a name and nationality and that boys and girls must be registered immediately after birth.

According to UNICEF, 60 million births worldwide fail to be registered every year. The absence of civil status constitutes a mechanism for social exclusion.

In certain countries, patriarchal laws on the nationality of children and gender-based discrimination that prohibits mothers from declaring births or accessing the necessary education or health care hinder the registration of births. Those mothers and children generally belong to ethnic minorities and live in rural areas. Violence, exclusion and poverty are thus perpetuated.

Birth certificates provide each individual with proof of identity. They must be presented during civil procedures (marriage, inheritance, divorce, death) and administrative procedures (enrolment in educational institutions, registration on electoral rolls, access to health care, employment and identity documents, etc.).

Girls that do not have civil status are like ghosts. Their rights are flouted. Without an identity, they are invisible to development programmes but are coveted by human traffickers.

It is vital to make these invisible girls visible so that they may access the numerous programmes that target the various tradition-related, patriarchal, financial and geographical obstacles, thus ensuring their security and emancipation.

Combating economic, psychological, physical and sexual violence

Violence against women and girls is a fundamental obstacle to equality between men and woman and is a violation of women's rights – the right to mental, psychological and physical integrity, the right to dignity, the right to fundamental freedoms, the right to freedom of movement without constraints linked to being a woman, the right to security and the right to life.

Rape, prostitution, female genital mutilation, marital and domestic violence, sexual harassment at the workplace and in the public domain, forced marriage, "honour" crimes, polygamy, female circumcision and the sexual abuse of children result from a historical patriarchal system that is based on male domination over women, whatever their age, social status, sexual orientation or origin.

Prostitution and archaic chauvinistic violence

The system of prostitution is one of the pillars of sexual inequality and violence against women. It is contrary to human dignity and equality between people and is a manifestation of an archaic patriarchal system. It causes the

humiliation and degradation of women, without taboo, in the interest of male domination and female submission.

It constitutes the appropriation of another person's sexuality using power generated by money, and targets those who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation because of personal reasons or financial difficulties. The vast majority of prostituted persons have suffered psychological or sexual violence that has destroyed their self-esteem and respect for their own and other people's bodies. It is vital to help them regain their self-respect.

In order to eliminate all forms of gender-based violence, the procurement of sex must be prohibited by law. Human bodies are not goods and must be protected from all exploitation and commercialization.

That prohibition is the foundation for all non-sexist education aimed at ensuring that children, both girls and boys, are able to mature into adults that respect their own bodies and the bodies of others.

Such violence can be eradicated by the implementation of the Palermo protocol on prostitution and trafficking in persons, the punishment of individuals that procure sex, the repeal of punishments for prostituted persons and the establishment of occupational reintegration policies for all those wishing to escape the clutches of prostitution.

Violence resulting from patriarchal customs and traditions

While in France the law protects all girls and women from violence committed in the name of tradition or religion, families impose the customs of their countries of origin on girls and women. *Regards de femmes* warns against and reacts strongly to two such key forms of violence.

Female circumcision

This form of violence can be committed against girl-children in France or when their parents go on holiday to their countries of origin.

French law defines female circumcision as a form of female genital mutilation: The offence of "mutilation" is aggravated if carried out by persons with authority (parents); "genital" relates to sexual offences – when such offences are committed abroad by persons ordinarily residing in France, those persons shall be prosecuted upon their return to French territory.

Forced marriage

In France, young girls are subject to early marriage and pregnancy according to the customs of their countries of origin. Nevertheless, the age of consent for both girls and boys is 18 and civil marriage – the only form of marriage recognized by law – must precede any religious "marriage" ceremony. However, parents flout the law by organizing religious marriages for underage girls (sometimes aged under 15).